

Michigan  
Department  
of Human  
Services

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# Articles in Today's Clips

**Monday, May 12, 2008**

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

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May 11, 2008

## Need for food aid grows in state

Government help up 53% since '03

*BY CHRIS CHRISTOFF*

*FREE PRESS LANSING BUREAU CHIEF*

Mike Remenar never thought he'd rely on food stamps and Medicaid to help support his family in comfortable Grosse Pointe Woods.

He hasn't found suitable work since losing his job 10 months ago as an auto parts designer. He depleted his unemployment benefits and savings, struggles under a \$1,400 monthly mortgage, and the travel agency he and his wife operate at home won't pay the bills.

"In the past 10 years, I've been laid off a number of times, but never this long," said Remenar, 60. "Especially living in this community, to be in this position is a bit awkward."

Remenar's unexpected dive into public assistance is a testament to the depth of stagnation for Michigan's economy. A record number of Michiganders are using government food stamps -- 1.26 million in 590,600 households during March, according to the Michigan Department of Human Services. Three in every 10 of the households -- 174,200 -- are in Wayne County. Genesee County ranks second with 38,179 households getting aid, followed by Oakland with 34,060, Kent with 32,564 and Macomb with 31,718.

Since 2003, the number of Michigan households receiving food stamps leaped 53%, the third biggest increase behind Massachusetts at 77% and Iowa at 63%. One in five Michigan children under age 18 is in a household qualifying for food stamps. (Nationwide, 27.7 million people received food stamps in January.)

It's not known how many Michiganders are first-timers for food assistance. Or how many live in neighborhoods where a Bridge Card seems out of place.

## Families making do

Remenar said he worked for 30 years as a designer for various auto parts makers. He said using a Bridge Card the first time seemed strange.

"You do what you have to do," he said.

He said the Medicaid prescription drug program helps cover the costs of his family's ongoing medications. Remenar and his wife, Ruth, have sons ages 10, 14 and 17.

They've lived in their Grosse Pointe Woods home 14 years. Remenar said it would be difficult to sell his house. Homes in his neighborhood have been listed as long as three years, he said, and there have been several nearby foreclosed homes.

Besides a small income from his travel agency, Remenar makes about \$250 a week delivering newspapers. He said his wife, formerly a paralegal, also is seeking work.

He's willing to relocate to another state or country, accept a smaller salary than he earned before his last layoff and, if needed, be a weekend commuter. He wants his children to remain in Grosse Pointe schools.

In the meantime, he has applied for jobs at Lowe's, Home Depot, Starbucks and Caribou Coffee.

"I have confidence we'll work things out and stay afloat," he said. "My wife is upset; she's very concerned about it."

Michigan's economic duress is more widespread than in past recessions, said Gerry Brisson, vice president for development at Gleaners Food Bank, which supplies 400 food aid agencies.

"The big difference now is the number of people in suburbs who are feeling it," Brisson said. "Poverty in the city has been bad for a long time, but poverty in the suburbs is going up in Livingston, Oakland and Macomb counties."

## Embarrassing necessity for some

Bridge Card recipients often seek local food donations because the card won't buy enough for most families, he said. The average bridge card allowance per person is about \$100 per month -- about \$500 for a family of five.

John Frida, store manager at Value Center supermarket in Livonia, said there are more Bridge Card users, but added that it's partly because of the closures of Farmer Jack supermarkets in the area.

For Angelia Moncrief, 31, a single mother who lives on the west side of Detroit, food stamps and Medicaid health insurance became an embarrassing necessity when she lost her \$38,000 office manager job at Oakwood Hospital in Dearborn last September.

"Where I came from, not having to depend on anybody -- the system, my mama, my brothers, my boyfriend -- and now I have to use the Bridge Card," Moncrief said. "Now, everyone is looking at me when I pull it out. They think, 'She's doing nothing, she's on welfare, she's poor.' That's what the looks say."

Moncrief and her 12-year-old son moved in with her mother. She had been on welfare once before, and thought she had climbed into self-sufficiency with five years of full-time work. She said she's studying online for a degree in human resources.

"I thought it was going to be easy because of my background in human resources payroll and customer services," she said. "I really want to stay in the \$30,000 range. I didn't think it would be this hard."

"You have to have a backup plan," she added. "You never know what's going to happen."

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www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-ap-mi-hungrymichigan,0,6114556.story

**chicagotribune.com**

## **Mich. food stamp use up 53% since 2003, rate well above US**

Associated Press

10:13 AM CDT, May 11, 2008

LANSING, Mich.

The number of Michigan households getting food stamps has risen 53 percent in the past five years, with one in eight state residents now aided by the nutrition assistance program, authorities say.

In all, 590,600 state households got food stamps in March, the Michigan Department of Human Services says. The households include 1.26 million people, or 12.5 percent of the state's 10.07 million residents.

Nationwide, 27.7 million people received food stamps in January -- or 9.2 percent of the nation's 300 million people.

Michigan's economic distress is more widespread than in past recessions, said Gerry Brisson, vice president for development at Gleaners Food Bank. The group supplies 400 food aid agencies.

"The big difference now is the number of people in suburbs who are feeling it," Brisson told the Detroit Free Press for a story Sunday. "Poverty in (Detroit) has been bad for a long time, but poverty in the suburbs is going up in Livingston, Oakland and Macomb counties."

Mike Remenar lives in the affluent Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe Woods and said he never thought he would find himself using food stamps to feed his family.

The 60-year-old auto parts designer said he has been unable to find suitable work since losing his job 10 months ago.

"In the past 10 years, I've been laid off a number of times, but never this long," he said. "Especially living in this community, to be in this position is a bit awkward."

The average food stamp allowance is about \$100 per person per month.

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Michigan Department of Human Services: <http://www.michigan.gov/dhs>

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## Muskegon Chronicle

### State food stamp use sharply since 2003

Monday, May 12, 2008

ASSOCIATED PRESS WITH LOCAL REPORTS

The number of Michigan households getting food stamps has risen 53 percent in the past five years, with one in eight state residents now aided by the nutrition assistance program, authorities say.

That number mirrors trends in Muskegon County in which those receiving food assistance increased more than 40 percent since 2002 -- from 9,282 cases to 16,761 last March.

In all, 590,600 state households got food stamps in March, the Michigan Department of Human Services says. The households include 1.26 million people, or 12.5 percent of the state's 10.07 million residents.

Nationwide, 27.7 million people received food stamps in January -- or 9.2 percent of the nation's 300 million people.

Michigan's economic distress is more widespread than in past recessions, said Gerry Brisson, vice president for development at Gleaners Food Bank. The group supplies 400 food aid agencies, including Muskegon County Cooperating Churches, which funds between 10-12 Gleaners food trucks a month, more than twice as many as three years ago.

Area churches spend \$780 to have Gleaners of West Michigan deliver a truck with 10,000 pounds of food, enough to feed about 200 families for a week. There are 10 trucks scheduled to deliver food in May with one at 4:30 p.m. today at Outpouring Worship Center at 11811 Heights-Ravenna in Ravenna.

"The big difference now is the number of people in suburbs who are feeling it," Brisson told the Detroit Free Press. "Poverty in (Detroit) has been bad for a long time, but poverty in the suburbs is going up in Livingston, Oakland and Macomb counties."

Mike Remenar lives in the affluent Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe Woods and said he never thought he would find himself using food stamps to feed his family.

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The average food stamp allowance is about \$100 per person per month.

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## Stamp Out Hunger drive collects 51 tons of food

Monday, May 12, 2008

**The Grand Rapids Press**

GRAND RAPIDS -- Postal carriers collected 102,423 pounds of food from Saturday's annual Stamp Out Hunger food drive and expect the total to exceed 105,000 pounds when other donations are counted, said Larry Ames, event coordinator.

The amount is slightly higher than last year's total.

Organizers were pleased with the outcome of the 16th annual drive, given the poor economy, Ames said.

Donations go to help local families in need of assistance.

Residents were asked to place nonperishable items next to mailboxes Saturday.

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# Niles Daily Star

ONLINE EDITION

[Print Page](#)

Stamp Out Hunger nets nearly 40,000 pounds of food just from Niles

*Monday, May 12, 2008 11:14 AM EDT*

NILES - Unless you bought the Forever stamps, you need to add a penny as today the cost of a first-class letter increased to 42 cents. Post cards also increased, to 27 cents.

Last year, when the stamps increased, consumers were given the opportunity to purchase Forever stamps. Today, the price of these stamps goes up to 42 cents, but they can be used in the event of future increases.

The Stamp Out Hunger food drive Saturday netted 39,990 pounds of food from Niles residents alone. Totals of the surrounding areas are expected to surpass last year's donations and will be released soon.

Published: May 10, 2008 09:51 am

## **Seniors served affordable meals**

BY MELISSA DOMSIC  
TRAVERSE CITY RECORD-EAGLE

TRAVERSE CITY -- Bunny Sanford went out for lunch with her husband and friends for a meal of Swedish meatballs, mashed potatoes and vegetables -- all without stepping foot in a restaurant.

They're patrons of the Traverse City Senior Center's lunch program, which offers meals each weekday at noon.

"When you're down to one or two people at home, it's a lot less expensive than going out and buying everything for the meal," said Sanford, a Traverse City resident. "It's hard to cook for one or two."

It's convenient, well-balanced and cheaper than a McDonald's value meal. A \$2.50 donation is requested of seniors 60 and older and their spouses; everyone else pays a \$5 charge.

The senior center has hosted the program, operated by the Northwest Michigan Human Services Agency, for more than 30 years, said Vi Brott, the agency's Meals on Wheels director.

"It was really designed initially as a wellness program, so we serve well-balanced meals, but the program is for everybody, it's not just for low-income people," she said.

Senior Center Director Lori Wells estimates fewer than 30 people a day show up for the meal, but she'd like to see between 50 and 80.

"Now, with economic times the way they are, we want seniors to be aware of this food program," she said.

The program is largely federally funded, so it's important to keep participant numbers up to keep the dollars coming, she said.



The human services agency provides 23 luncheon centers in five area counties, including ones at Riverview Terrace apartments and Grand Traverse Pavilions.

The meals are meant to provide seniors with more than just nutritional value.

"Just getting people out and being with other people and socializing also has health benefits," Brott said.

Traverse City resident Wilma King said she likes to get out and keep busy.

"I like the food and the people," she said.

[Click here to view "News Update" in full-screen.](#)

Updated: 5/9/2008 2:47:44 PM

### **Police looking for man who poked 8-year-old girl**

LINCOLN PARK — Police are looking for a man who allegedly poked an 8-year-old girl in the arm with a needle before trying to abduct her at about 7 p.m. Thursday.

According to police, the man tried to pull the girl into a van at Lincoln Park Mobile Home Village, 3075 Dix-Toledo. When she screamed, he drove off.

A short while later, he was seen riding in an older model, two-door gray car being driven by a woman.

The suspect is described as white with a medium skin tone, 40 to 50 years old, 6 feet tall and weighing 230 pounds. He has shoulder-length, salt-and-pepper hair and a moustache.

The van he was driving is a white, older model in poor condition, possibly a 1990s conversion van with a rusted bottom. The vehicle has black, plastic covering a rear compartment window and an old English "D" or a dollar sign spray painted on the rear of the vehicle.

Anyone with information is asked to call police at 1-313-381-1800 ext. 222 or to email [policetip@citylp.com](mailto:policetip@citylp.com).

The child is reportedly doing fine after being treated at Henry Ford Wyandotte Hospital and Children's Hospital of Michigan.

— Jason Alley

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May 12, 2008

## My parenting is under the microscope

*BY JEFF SEIDEL*  
*FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER*

OK. So I'm a horrible parent. On a beautiful Saturday afternoon, I made my kids go outside: "Turn off the Xbox and do something!"

Two hours later, I was taking Nick, 7, to an emergency room because he got hit in the face by a plastic lacrosse stick.

He had a nasty cut near his eye. Blood everywhere. He looked like a Red Wing after playing the Colorado Avalanche.

"What happened?" a nurse asked. I didn't say a word. I was leery. In this day and age, when you walk into a hospital with an injured child, you feel like everybody is staring at you, assuming the worst.

You feel like there is a SWAT team, hiding in the ceiling, ready to jump out and arrest you.

"We were playing lacrosse," Nick said. "My big brother swung his stick and hit me."

"Nick, do your parents or any adults who take care of you, ever abuse you?" the nurse asked.

Ka-BOOM! My jaw hit the carpet.

"No," he said.

Maybe I'm from the old school, but accidents happen.

Boys have a tendency to roughhouse, especially if they are keeping score. Sooner or later, somebody ends up getting whacked. At least they used to, back when kids played outside and got grass stains on their jeans. These days, they only get carpal tunnel syndrome from computer games.

I don't know when kids stopped being kids. Whatever happened to Kick the Can? Or Ghosts in the Graveyard? Can you imagine the lawsuits that would arise today from Spin the Bottle, not to mention Truth or Dare?

The good old days are long gone.

Three nurses asked Nick what happened. I felt like we were being investigated. On one level, I understand. If it helps catch an evil monster, if it protects a child, I'm for it. But still, it doesn't make it easier.

Let me be clear: I hope there is a special place in hell for anyone who hurts a child. I hope the devil takes these monsters and spends eternity shoving hot coals under their fingernails.

But still, I felt uncomfortable that my son had to hear that question. I felt worse, later, trying to explain to him that there are parents who hurt their kids.

There was a happy ending: Nick didn't get stitches, thank goodness. They glued his skin back together, which was seriously cool but sorta creepy, in a space-aged way.

That night, we had a bonfire and roasted marshmallows. After eating several s'mores, my kids ran around the backyard on a sugar buzz. They had a blast. They were acting like kids. I mean, as best as I can remember, back when kids were not connected to a computer or sending each other text messages, in the same room.

"Be careful!" I screamed, afraid of going back to the hospital.

They could skin their knees. They could bonk heads. They could fall down and break a bone. And how would you explain that? Who in the world would believe that a kid was actually outside playing?

To paraphrase the great Chinese philosopher Confucius: Sometimes, that Xbox is a heck of an option.

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## Muskegon Chronicle

### Great-aunt steps in to raise nephews after family crisis

Sunday, May 11, 2008

**By Susan Harrison Wolffis**

**susanharrison@muskegonchronicle.com**

Four years ago, Craig and Debbie Sowa thought their nest was empty.

Their sons, Christopher and Matt, were on their own, pursuing college and careers. Craig Sowa, who had retired from the Marines after 22 years, was working for Churchill Communications. Debbie was manager of Bath and Body Works.

Life was good, what they'd worked for.

The Sowas were finally back in their hometown of Muskegon after years of living on military bases, "too far" from both of their families. They were planning, saving for their retirement years.

But in May 2004, the Sowas came home from a business conference and were greeted with news that changed their family's lives forever -- and filled their empty nest to the brim.

While they were at the conference, three of Debbie Sowa's great-nephews were placed in foster care. The boys' biological mother had left the home. Their biological father, who is Sowa's nephew, was in jail on drug charges.

When child protection workers found the boys, who were 7, 5 and 2 years old at the time, they were living under an overturned boat.

Details of the case are too sensitive to repeat publicly, but the boys -- Tryston, whom they call Tre', now 11; Devon, 8; and Derek, whom they call D.J., 6 -- were in peril.

That is until their Aunt Debbie and Uncle Craig got wind of what was going on.

"If it were you, wouldn't you walk

across the country if you knew someone in the family was in trouble?" Debbie Sowa asks.

She and her husband immediately sprung into action, calling authorities, locating the boys, asking themselves questions they never thought they'd face at that time in their lives.

Should they open their home to the boys?

"We cried for two days," Debbie Sowa remembers. "Do we? Should we? Can we? We'd already raised boys. We had a big enough house. We had jobs."

She and her husband were both 46 years old.

"Somebody had to step forward," she says.

"You don't lose relatives," her husband adds quietly, his words meeting hers in mid-sentence.

On Aug. 6, 2004, Tre', Devon and D.J. moved in with the Sowas, who became their legal guardians.

"We said: We can raise these boys until their parents get their crap together," Debbie Sowa says.

"We're in it for the long haul," Craig Sowa says.

Four years later, their biological father is out of jail but sees them rarely. Sometimes the boys stay overnight, but only one at a time, with their biological mother and her new family.

The Sows encourage the relationship.

"They have to know where they've come from ... their heritage," Debbie Sowa says.

When the boys moved in with the Sows, they weren't total strangers, but it took time to gain the boys' trust.

"They came with issues," Craig Sowa says.

Debbie Sowa took a look at the situation and quit her job in retail that demanded so many hours and started training as a financial analyst for Primerica that offered flex time.

"We needed to nurture these boys," she says. "We suddenly had homework to do all over again, parent-teacher conferences, the Tooth Fairy to deal with."

She tells the story of filling the family nest with three great-nephews just days before Mother's Day. She and her husband, who both turned 50 this spring, are sitting on the deck of their comfortable home in Norton Shores, watching the boys finish homework before soccer practice.

It is an idyllic place to bring up kids.

Their backyard butts up against the playground of Lincoln Park Elementary School in the Mona Shores Public Schools District. This is a neighborhood where kids holler over the fence at one another, asking permission to play or to explore the small patch of woods that by some miracle hasn't been developed in the neighborhood.

"The kids literally hop the fence to get to school every day," Debbie Sowa says.

She and her husband can't help but think back to when the boys first moved in. They were underweight and badly cared for. They needed medical attention. They needed discipline. D.J. couldn't talk. He wasn't potty trained. Devon was withdrawn. He didn't know his colors or the alphabet. Tre' was used to taking care of his younger brothers, making decisions as if he were the adult in the house. By the time he got to Aunt Debbie and Uncle Craig's house, he was angry. He acted out. He let every pent-up frustration fly.

Debbie Sowa can laugh now, but she remembers back to those first months when she relied on a punishment from her own childhood to correct some bad habits. She washed his mouth out with soap when things got rough.

"He was the only one who didn't get the flu that year. I attribute it to the antibacterial soap," she says, laughing as much at herself as the boy who tells her these days that he loves her, wants to change his last name to Sowa and call her "Mom."

Her answer is always the same.

"You have a mom," she says. "I'm your Aunt Debbie."

It is for the sake of the boys that she draws a clear line of distinction in the family heritage. Even though she's the one who stays up all night with the boys when they're sick and insists on them brushing their teeth before going to bed. Even though she's the one at every parent-teacher conference, who does room mother duty, soccer practice and Saturday morning scrimmages. Even though she's the one who insists on homework before playing outside and lays down the law on two hours -- tops -- of TV and video games. Even though she's the one who insists that they write thank-you notes for every gift and kindness shown.

"Sometimes I think: 'Where would they be now? Lost?' " Debbie Sowa says.

She has a big voice, a laugh that won't quit and when she's mad, she shouts. She believes in the no-nonsense approach to bringing up kids, she says, sounding tougher than she really is.

At that night's soccer practice, Devon and D.J. get into a scuffle that ends in punches, tears and hard feelings. She separates them, makes them sit apart from each other while they cool off. When the time is right, she touches their hair, gives them something to drink, lets them have their space. Then she makes them apologize to each other.

"This is what life is about, guys," she says.

Pretty soon, she hears quiet apologies out of them.

"I accept your apology," Devon says.

"I accept yours," D.J. answers.

Craig Sowa turns away, stifling laughter that is awfully close to tears. He is Marine-tough after 22 years in service, proud to say he can still fit into his dress blues at this age. But he takes in the sight of the boys laughing and rough-housing, their stomachs full from an after-school snack, part of a soccer team and he tears up.

He says his wife is the one who holds the family together. When he was deployed to Saudi Arabia, Cuba and Iraq while on active duty, she kept things afloat with two sons at home. Now she's doing it with three "little guys."

"You don't want to see someone lost in this society," Craig Sowa adds.

The Sowas are not the only family who love these boys. Their biological great-grandparents, Jean and Bob Nelson of Muskegon, have been there since the beginning.

"Those kids were in such need," Jean Nelson says, "and they were so little."

Grandma Nelson brings a picnic lunch to every soccer practice. Debbie Sowa's sisters and brother help pay for swimming lessons and soccer and take the boys on overnights. So, do Craig Sowa's brothers, who technically are no relation to them.

"You've heard it takes a village to raise kids?" Craig Sowa says. "Here it's a whole family."

Michelle Martin, a marriage and family therapist at Harbor Psychological Associates in Muskegon, says family stepping in and raising children "is not a new phenomenon, but it does seem to be on the increase."

"It is a huge commitment of time and energy," she says, "and it requires huge amounts of stamina ... because it isn't easy."

For Debbie Sowa, it's easier to laugh and make jokes than tackle such heavy conversation.

"I still believe in the same values as with the two older boys," she says.

Over the past four years, her life has changed in ways she never anticipated.

"Whoever thought I'd end up a soccer mom?" she jokes.

Her husband watches the landscape of his new family, boys on the soccer field, boys eating submarine sandwiches, boys kissing their great-grandma and high-fiving great-grandpa. Jean Nelson is telling everyone in earshot how proud she is of her daughter and husband for raising them.

"These guys give us life, too," Craig Sowa says.

And he and his wife exchange private, personal glances when they think no one is looking.

"You have to be a family," she says.



## Opinion

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### Editorial: Free Clinic a welcome addition

*POSTED: May 9, 2008*

Too often in today's economy people with legitimate needs "fall between the cracks" of our welfare system.

Thanks to volunteers of the Free Clinic of Alpena, when it comes to health care, those needs will be addressed. While it is true some of the patients who will be treated traditionally would have received care elsewhere, the Free Clinic should ultimately become the place for these patients and thus, provide a huge asset to other area medical facilities.

While located at the First Presbyterian Church, Rev. Steve Hammond explained the clinic — because of a diversity of volunteers — will not offer faith counseling in addition to treatment. However, as part of the church facility, the clinic complements other outreach programs located at the church, and thus fits into the church's philosophy of missions within the community.

The clinic operates Tuesdays and Thursdays from 6-8:30 p.m. and reservations are requested to reduce the waiting time for patients. In just a few short weeks of operation already the clinic has the volunteer help of 25 medical personnel — including doctors, physician assistants and nurses.

The Free Clinic of Alpena is an excellent example of volunteers reaching out and addressing one of the important needs facing our region. We applaud their effort of making a difference.

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# Health coverage a matter of life and death in Michigan

by [Michelle Swartz](#) , last modified May 10. 2008 1:07AM

A national study found that nearly two people die daily in Michigan due to lack of health insurance.

Families USA, a national organization for health care consumers, recently reported on the alarming statistics based on a national study by the Institute of Medicine. It concludes that nearly two people likely will die every day in Michigan because they don't have insurance.

"Our report highlights how our inadequate system of health coverage condemns a great number of Michiganians to an early death, simply because they don't have the same access to health care as their insured neighbors," said Ron Pollack, Executive Director of Families USA, in a press release. "The conclusions are sadly clear - a lack of health coverage is a matter of life and death for many Michiganians."

He added that those without insurance often skip checkups, screenings and other preventative care. The result is more people are diagnosed with disease in an advanced stage, which reduces the chance of survival.

The Institute of Medicine found uninsured adults are 25 percent more likely to die prematurely than adults with private health insurance. Another academic study found that uninsured adults between the ages of 55 and 64

are even more likely to die prematurely. Lack of health insurance is the third leading cause of death, behind heart disease and cancer.

Families USA estimates that nearly two working-age Michigan residents die each day due to lack of health insurance, which is about 650 people in 2006. The organization also reported that more than 4,200 uninsured Michigan adults (between ages 25 and 64) died between 2000 and 2006.

In a 2002 report, the Institute of Medicine estimated that 18,000 nationwide died in 2000 because of lack of health care coverage. The number was later updated by the Urban Institute, which reported at least 22,000 adults died in 2006 because they had no health insurance.

State politicians are troubled by the staggering statistics.

"The results of this report are astounding and unacceptable," U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said in a press release. "This report provides further evidence of why health care in this country should be a right not a privilege. "

U.S. Rep. John D. Dingell, D-Dearborn, is equally concerned.

"This report from Families USA reminds us that the most important measure is the human cost. The current system is costing lives," he said in a press release. "... Far too many people are suffering under the current system. We can create a universal health care plan that is not just affordable, but it will save lives. As this report proves - we need such a system and we need it

now."

Families USA is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, national organization for health care consumers. It advocates for high-quality, affordable health care for Americans. Its Web site is [www.familiesusa.org](http://www.familiesusa.org).

Detroit Free Press

May 10, 2008

## **Infant mortality still too prevalent**

There are no positives to take away from state data showing a stubborn link between race, class and the rise of infant mortality rates in Michigan. Black babies are three times more likely than white babies to die during their first year of life, according to a study out from Kids Count, a Lansing-based research group. And in Wayne County, the study showed an increase in deaths among white babies as well.

Increasing access to prenatal education and care looks to be the obvious solution, but it's neither an easy nor affordable conversation in Lansing these days. Maybe it's time for a cavalry of caring Michigan doctors to consider doing a pro-bono public awareness campaign in the counties where infant mortality rates are proving most intractable. Maybe they could go further, and increase the availability of low-cost or free clinics for expectant mothers. After all, spreading messages and providing up-front care are loads cheaper than tallying the loss of so many young lives.

# Genesee County charities even seeking gas handouts as prices soar

by Ashley Smith | The Flint Journal

Sunday May 11, 2008, 2:00 PM

**GENESEE COUNTY, Michigan** -- Next time you're looking to donate to your local charity, be sure to throw in a gas card with the non-perishables and blankets.

As gas peaks to \$4 a gallon, charitable organizations are finding themselves strained between delivering services and meeting the high price of gas.

"It's been pretty devastating," said Gregg Berent, director of Catholic Outreach.

The charity, which transports about 100 children who require medical treatment to Lansing, Ann Arbor and Detroit, has seen its gas spending increase to about \$1,000 to \$1,200 a week, Berent said.

For the first time, Catholic Outreach is appealing to the public to contribute to the transportation program with gas cards and donations, Berent said. They're not alone in their struggle to provide services, along with millions of other Americans, organizations such as the Food Bank of Eastern Michigan are struggling to meet the demands of diesel prices.

The food bank estimated in January its transportation budget for the year would cost about \$84,000. The organization, which covers 22 counties, will exceed that and already has seen about a 20 percent increase, said Bill Kerr, president of the food bank.

"We will put on our (regular) trucks and semis roughly 30,000 to 35,000 miles a piece per year," Kerr said. "Depending on the (truck), you're getting less than 10 miles a gallon in those vehicles."

With no sign that gas prices will stabilize or drop any time soon, many of these organizations are just hoping they will get by. Others are more fortunate, such as the senior nutrition program ran by the Genesee County Community Access Resource Department, or G-CCARD.

G-CCARD has managed to meet transportation demands thanks to the Genesee County senior millage which has provided additional dollars to the program and allows the mobile meal program to increase about 50 percent, said Steve Walker, executive director of G-CCARD said.

While the millage has been able to provide some funding, currently all 12 drivers use their own vehicles in the program and are reimbursed at the

federal reimbursement rate for gas, which hasn't adjusted to the rising prices, Walker said.

Some people have been aware that the charities they support are experiencing the same financial blow as they are when it comes to paying at the pump.

The food bank has received a lot of support from the community, and received about 24 percent more in donations during an April fundraiser, Kerr said.

While these charities are optimistic about the philanthropic nature of the community, there is still a level of uncertainty regarding the economic future.

"At this time, our services have not diminished with the price of fuel," Kerr said, thanks to the community. "But I'm not sure what the future will hold for us."

# State Programs Add Safety Net for the Poorest

By [RACHEL L. SWARNS](#)

The New York Times

May 12, 2008

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — For years, state welfare offices like the one alongside Interstate 30 have drawn the unemployed. But these days, the red-brick building here is also attracting poor, working parents with an unexpected offer: \$204 a month in cash.

Shelly Thomas, a stockroom clerk and single mother, is using her windfall from the State of [Arkansas](#) to tune up the old Chevrolet she drives to work. Talia Greenwood, a day care worker with four children, spends the money on gas, diapers and baby formula.

The women are pioneers in an emerging social experiment as states across the country try to go beyond simply moving people off welfare. Over the last two years, officials in Arkansas and at least a dozen other states have announced plans to extend the safety net — through monthly cash payments — to thousands of low-income workers struggling to gain a foothold in the work world.

Most states focus on people who have left welfare for low-wage jobs. Officials believe that the programs, which typically combine several months of cash assistance with career counseling, health insurance and subsidized child care, will help low-wage workers weather family illnesses and cash shortages and deter them from cycling back onto the welfare rolls.

Arkansas provides poor working parents with \$204 a month, plus bonuses for staying employed, for up to two years. Oregon offers \$150 a month for up to a year. Virginia gives \$50 a month for up to a year. And the California

Legislature is considering a plan, proposed by Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), to provide \$40 a month to 41,000 working families that receive food stamps.

“The goal had been getting parents off of welfare,” said Jack Tweedie of the National Conference of State Legislatures, who counsels states on poverty issues and has advised Arkansas officials. “The emphasis now is much more on work and helping parents stay in work.”

The new strategy reflects, in part, a growing concern about the challenges facing the poor nearly 12 years after Congress overhauled welfare laws. While states have drastically reduced their welfare caseloads, research suggests that they have been far less successful in helping people find and keep jobs that lift families out of poverty.

The trend has also been driven by new federal rules that require states to engage 50 percent of welfare recipients in work-related activities. By offering payments to people already working, states are also trying to ensure that they meet federal mandates and avoid steep fines.

By October, at least 11 states will offer cash assistance for working families. Two others plan to start next year, and an additional three states, including California, are weighing plans. Most rely on federal welfare money to finance the programs.

Advocates for low-income families point out, however, that benefits are so low in some states that officials seem to be more focused on meeting federal work requirements than on helping the working poor. Federal officials say the programs may siphon money from the welfare recipients they were intended to serve.

“One of the key issues is: how rich is the benefit?” said Liz Schott, who has studied the programs as a senior fellow at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal research group. “Is it nominal, or is it an amount that will really help?”

The programs differ considerably. While Utah offers \$474 a month for two months and \$237 for a third month for a family of three, Michigan provides



\$10 a month for six months. Massachusetts gives \$7 a month to more than 13,000 food stamp recipients.

Alison Goodwin, a spokeswoman for the human services department in Massachusetts, acknowledged that the benefit was “modest.” But she said it would increase the work participation rate.

Sidonie Squier, who heads the federal agency that oversees public assistance, criticized what she described as accounting tricks to meet federal mandates.

“Time and taxpayer resources are best spent helping people on welfare find jobs, not manipulating the system,” said Ms. Squier, director of the family assistance office in the Administration for Children and Families.

Because the programs are new, it remains unclear whether they will help poor parents keep jobs and advance beyond low-wage work.

But the relief has been welcomed by many families as food and gas prices soar and good jobs are harder to find because of the struggling economy.

Ms. Thomas, one of the Arkansas mothers, bubbles with enthusiasm as she envisions graduating from college next year and leaving her \$10-an-hour stockroom job at a clothing store for a career in computer programming.

She says the payments from the Arkansas Work Pays Program help enormously — with gas, groceries and car repairs — as she juggles college courses and work.

“I need that extra help, even though I’m working,” said Ms. Thomas, 24, who has two sons and receives free child care from the program.

Ms. Greenwood, shy and soft-spoken behind her wire-rimmed glasses, agrees. She had been on and off welfare for years until Work Pays came along.

State caseworkers gave her a \$2,500 down payment to buy a car so she could take her children to school and still get to her two day care center jobs on time.

Now, Ms. Greenwood dreams about running a day care center and owning her own home. Sometimes, she can even imagine the little brick house with the big green yard where her children could run and run.

“I had a dream that everything came together, the way that I always wanted it in my heart,” said Ms. Greenwood, 33, who lives in a two-bedroom apartment with her four children and a grandchild. “Now, I have that chance.”

But if the experiences of the two women highlight the promise of such programs, they also underscore the challenges.

About a third of the 2,334 people who have participated since the program began in 2006 have dropped out because they lost jobs, failed to work enough hours or opted out of the program, state statistics show. (Participants must complete at least 30 hours of work-related activities each week, and 24 of those hours must involve paid work.) So far, only 7 percent of participants have left because their jobs pushed them above the program’s income limit. Nearly half worked in jobs that paid less than \$500 a month.

Officials say clients struggle to find and keep good jobs because of limited education and work experience. The current economic climate makes it harder.

Ms. Thomas was told recently that her store hours would drop from 30 to 20 a week because of declining sales. She is scrambling to find a second job. Ms. Greenwood was fired from her first job, as a \$9-an-hour warehouse clerk, when she missed a day to care for her sick children. She found another job at a day care center, but it paid less.

Arkansas officials say such struggles are only part of the story. Eighty-two percent of the 1,225 parents enrolled in Work Pays in March were holding

jobs and in good standing, they say. And officials are fine-tuning the program to make it stronger.

State officials increased the income limits from \$1,430 per month for a family of three to \$2,146 per month to allow more people to participate. They are encouraging clients to work two jobs, if necessary, to get the required hours. And they are urging workers to pursue promotions and better negotiate conflicts to improve job retention.

They hope the program — which was allocated \$5.9 million for the current fiscal year and is overseen by the director of the Department of Workforce Services, Artee Williams — will ultimately save money, in part, by reducing the number of people who return to welfare. Currently, about 20,000 residents are receiving public assistance. From 1998 to 2004, about 40 percent of the people who left the welfare rolls returned within 18 months.

Elroy Willoughby, the division chief of the state's temporary assistance program, says Arkansas wants to smooth that transition.

“They take their first steps, two or three steps, and they wobble and may fall,” Mr. Willoughby said. “We’re there to kind of help prop them up.”

Ms. Greenwood, who is due to receive a raise soon, prays that she is on her way. She does not have to look far for inspiration.

Her boss, Kathryn Conley, the assistant director of the All Star Kids day care center, is a graduate of the Work Pays program.

“I’m not just somebody walking down the street anymore,” Ms. Conley said proudly. “People call me ‘Miss Kathryn’ here.”



Saturday, May 10, 2008

# Arab-Americans honor Dingell, others

**Santiago Esparza / The Detroit News**

**DETROIT** -- ACCESS singled out U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Dearborn, Saturday night for his commitment to the Arab-American community.

The honor was part of the 37th annual awards dinner of ACCESS -- which stands for Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services. The dinner was scheduled to begin at 5 p.m. at the Detroit Marriott Renaissance; the more than 2,500 guests, ACCESS said, makes this the largest Arab-American event in the country.

Also chosen for awards Saturday: Russell Ebeid and Ismael Ahmed. Ebeid was picked for his philanthropic contributions, particularly his efforts to help young people. He was named recipient of ACCESS' first Making an Impact award.

Ahmed was named Arab American of the Year for his lifetime's work advocating on behalf of those of Middle Eastern descent. He was ACCESS' executive director before his appointment by Gov. Jennifer Granholm to head the Michigan Department of Human Services.

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